

Lee, Murray

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# **SAN DIEGO HISTORY CENTER**



**San Diego History Center  
Legacy Oral History Program**

**An Interview with**

**Murray K. Lee**

**May 19, 2016**

**Interviewed by**

**Amanda Tewes**

**Transcript Processed by**

**Amanda Tewes**

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## Preface:

Murray K. Lee is an eighty-nine-year-old resident of San Diego, local historian, and curator at the San Diego Chinese Historical Museum. Born in Michigan to a Caucasian mother and Chinese American father, he grew up in Detroit before moving to Washington, D.C. during the Depression; attended high school in Virginia before joining the Merchant Marines during World War II; earned an undergraduate degree from George Washington University, and a master's degree from the same school fifty-plus years later; worked as a geographer; retired and moved to San Diego in 1983, when he became involved with the Chinese Historical Society in San Diego.

In seeking to diversify the Oral History Collection, I wanted to expand upon our current holdings on San Diego's Chinese American community. Archivist Jane Kenealy recommended I interview Mr. Lee, whose research for his book *In Search of Gold Mountain: A History of the Chinese in San Diego, California*, led him to create the Chinese Historical Society Oral History Project; copies of these interviews reside at the San Diego History Center.

While I was certainly interested in Mr. Lee's life story, I was also eager to record his knowledge of the San Diego Chinese American community and the history of the Chinese Historical Society. Fortunately, Mr. Lee's work on *In Search of Gold Mountain* meant that he had a deep understanding of early Chinese migration to San Diego, as well as San Diego's Chinatown during the early to mid-twentieth-century.

I met Mr. Lee at his home in San Diego, and he immediately took me to his office to show me his work on his various projects relating to Chinese American history. In addition to his extensive files detailing his oral history work, Mr. Lee also showed me various art pieces around the house, including items painted and sculpted by his mother, as well as some wood carvings he did himself. It is clear he takes great pride in his deceased mother's artistic talent.

We sat down and talked at length in Mr. Lee's living room. The phone rang several times during the interview, but we did not pause the recording.

Mr. Lee spoke in depth about his family history. Indeed, he shared information about his grandfather, a Chinese immigrant who worked on railroads in the West and was captured by a Native American tribe. The fictionalized story of his grandfather's life is the basis for his new book, *Elephant and the Indians*.

Despite the fact that his historical research indicates the discrimination Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans have faced, Mr. Lee did not dwell on such experiences in his own life. He did, however, discuss the difficulties for his parents and his own marriage in dealing with Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws banning interracial marriages. Indeed, due to his mother's heritage Mr. Lee's birth certificate labels him as "Caucasian," and he feared that this would prevent him from being married in Virginia. Thus, he and his wife sought an out-of-state ceremony.

I was very pleased to speak with Mr. Lee and to hear his story, as well as the history of the Chinese in San Diego. I hope Mr. Lee's oral history leads to others documenting the region's Chinese American community.

**-Amanda Tewes, 2016**

## Murray Lee

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NARRATOR: MURRAY K. LEE

INTERVIEWER: Amanda Tewes

DATE: May 19, 2016

AT: This is an interview with Murray K. Lee for the San Diego History Center's Legacy Oral History Program. The interview is being conducted by Amanda Tewes at Mr. Lee's home in San Diego, California, on May 19, 2016.

So, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

ML: You're welcome.

AT: Starting at the beginning: when and where were you born?

ML: I was born in New Marshall, Michigan, in March of 1927. Uh, it was a farm of forty acres owned by my grandfather, whose name was Willis Murray. And, Murray turns out to be my mother's maiden name. That's how I end up with two, essentially two surnames.

I think that my mother and her sisters all had their children born on the farm there because it—I guess it was a lot easier to do because her mother would, you know, help take care of the children and she would find it a lot easier, I guess, to do that.

And so, we lived in Detroit at the time and my father had a catering business. And during the summers, rather than have the kids play out in the streets, you know, during the summertime they would send us to the farm. That would just be for about three months.

But, for one year when I was, I guess, about six years old I decided to stay on the farm for my first grade and attend—I had a cousin who was there, he was older than me by about seven years. And, we would get up early in the morning, like, 4:30, go to the barn and milk the cows. And I always said, "I want to milk one of the cows, too." So, they gave me one cow that I could handle because, you know, if your hands weren't big enough (laughs) it was difficult to milk a cow. And, we had about a, I forget, about half a dozen cows. And then, we'd come in for breakfast and by then you were *really hungry* so you ate a big breakfast.

And, my grandfather always wanted potatoes, he wanted potatoes for breakfast, for lunch, and for dinner. And of course, on the farm we grew our own potatoes.

But the house, the farmhouse that we were living in was formerly, like, a barn because the original house burned down in a storm. A fire started on the roof, I think, with lightning or something like that and burned to the ground. So, they had to move in and modify, you know, one of the old barns into a house. And, it didn't—well, nobody had central heating or anything. So, we had this big potbelly stove in the downstairs and

that was to heat the whole house. And, the way you heat the upstairs—because it had two stories—was they had this grate in the ceiling and the heat would rise up through that grate, you know, to the upstairs. But, it got very cold in the winter upstairs.

And, you had outdoor toilet; I guess most people remember those, never maybe experienced it. But, it was quite a bit a ways from the house. And, when it's snowing and cold nobody wanted to go there, so every bed had a potty under it. And of course, it was so cold that it used to freeze. (laughs) But, I can remember that.

And then, when you—after breakfast we would go to school. And, the schoolhouse was a one-room schoolhouse and it was about a mile-and-a-half away. And, we walked down—and the roads there were gravel roads at that time—and we'd walk down the gravel road, stop by the nearest neighbor, and their kids would come out and we'd go. By the time we got to school we had all the kids that used to live along that road and we'd end up in school.

And the school being a one-room schoolhouse, how did they teach? Well, each row was designated a grade. So, the first row was the first grade, second row second grade, and so on until you got up about—well, it's more like elementary school or junior high. When you got up to the higher grades, there were very few children there and not many boys. Because, when you got to the age, a certain age, you went to work on the farm. So, you didn't go to school when you were helping the family, you know, in whatever chores that they had to do.

So, I thought that was a good experience. I didn't want to go through the whole thing, (laughs) but just one year it was kind of interesting.

And, sometimes we would, we'd take a shortcut to school, we'd cut across one of the fields. And, in one of the fields there was this bull, and when you got—you go through the barbwire fence into his territory the bull would start to snort and come after you. So, one day we did that he started chasing us and I ran and jumped through the barbwire fence and tore the back of my overalls. (laughs) And according to my cousin, I would—when I walked into school I would always turn so that no one could see this rip in my rear end; it was very embarrassing. So, you remember those kinds of things.

So then, we went to school in Detroit and I remember going in one of the early grades there. And, they had this two-story, you know, schoolhouse, elementary school, and they had a chute that went from the upper stories down to the ground, like a slide. When there'd be a fire drill all the kids would just jump out, go out the upper stories, jump in this slide and slide down. I thought, Oh, that's cool. But you know, they didn't have it for the lower grades. I said, "I can't wait 'til I get, you know, upstairs and be able to do that." But, that never happened because we moved, we moved to Washington, D.C.

This was during the Depression period in the thirties. And, my father was smart enough to know that Washington, D.C., was probably the most Depression-free city in the country. Why? Because, they had all these programs, it was—Roosevelt was president—you know, all these programs and they hired a lot of people. So, everybody else was out there on breadlines and things like that, but in Washington you had—

[00:09:58]

AT: (phone rings) Did he continue catering in D.C. then or did he go another path?

ML: He opened a restaurant in Washington, one of the first Chinese restaurants— (phone rings) tell her to grab that phone (laughs) —it was called The Wun Kow, but it was on Thirteenth Street in Washington, D.C., and it was—became a well-known restaurant. And, a lot of the reporters and others in Washington used to go to that restaurant because it had the best eggrolls, very crispy, and that so it was famous for that. And, I remember it had a fountain in the middle of the in the dining room, very unique. I can't remember—my father said they lost the lease on it so he had to close the restaurant up. So anyway, I do have photos of us standing in front of that restaurant.

So, he did then work for these Chinese—they're kind of like nightclubs where you go upstairs and they have entertainment, you know, they serve Chinese food but they have—it's like vaudeville; they have these guys come in and sing and dance and there's a band and stuff like that. My brother and I used to go in the kitchen and they'd have this big jar of almond cookies, so we used to go and take all the almond cookies we wanted to eat. And, sometimes we would get to watch the show but it's usually very late at night. So and, I think that one of those restaurant was called The Lotus and another one was called The—I can't remember exactly, but they were on Fourteenth Street in Washington, D.C., the downtown area. And, later on when I was in high school out in Virginia we used to take our dates there at night, and then because they had the dancing and the floorshows and stuff like that, which was kind of fun.

So, after living in downtown San Diego not too far from the Chinatown, they had a small Chinatown in San Diego.

And my father, of course, being a Lee, and he was, he belonged to the Lee Family Association, which all the Chinese did, they belonged to their family associations. And, Lees were the dominant surname for Chinese in Washington, like in San Diego Hom is probably the dominant surname. So, when certain families went to a place they would—and say, Well, we're doing real well here; they would tell their—the other Chinese back in their home district, you know, Come to Washington; they're not discriminating here like they do in California, so we can—you know, might be a better chance to get the jobs and things. So, they did that there and also in Baltimore and Philadelphia, a few places along the East Coast.

Uh anyway, my father decided that maybe we should go out and live in Virginia because the schooling was better out there for us because of—and there was more open land, in fact. So, he got a place on, I think it was called the Columbia Pike in South Arlington. And, I guess most people know Arlington because of Arlington Cemetery, a very small county right close to Washington.

And, right up one block from where we had a house was a farm and they grew corn there. It just was leftover, I guess, from early days. And, there were even houses there and property that was former, what do they call them, mansions?

AT: Plantations?

ML: Plantations, yeah. Not big plantations, but they did—the remnants of early, early plantations where they had slaves and that. In fact, behind one of the houses that we lived in was this slave cemetery, and the developer wanted to develop that and put homes on it. And people would say, Hey, you know, that's a cemetery, you really can't do that. Oh no, no, no, that's not an official cemetery. So, they went back there and they bulldozed. And we, as kids, went out there and we saw them, and they bulldozed and we



saw these graves. As they bulldozed them you would see the coffins, you know, kind of smashed down to a—because they were wooden coffins and, you know, after years they kind of flattened out. But, we would see and we thought, Oh my gosh, I mean, that's real proof. But they said, Oh no, this is not an *official*—it's like a potter's field, you know? But, they were burying people there up until maybe in the thirties or something, former slaves. That's kind of (laughs) what you ran into when you went into Virginia.

Uh and, we had friends that lived out in the countryside towards Manassas. If you remember, the Battles of Manassas was one of the big things in Civil War day. And, we used to go there and I used to like to go through the fields and look for Indian arrowheads and things like that, which I used to do up in Michigan. And, alongside the arrowheads you would find Civil War bullets and even found a button that was on a Union soldier's uniform. So and, the way you—the best way to find those is, say, right after they plow the fields and there's a rain, and the rain will wash, you know, these things clear so that they might shine or show up different than just a rock or something like that. And so, that was kind of interesting. (laughs)

AT: Actually, tell me about your parents.

ML: My what?

AT: Your parents.

ML: My parents. Well, my mother was always an artist. Uh, she used to like to paint. And, when she was in Washington, lived in Washington, she went to the Corcoran School of Art, where she learned painting, like some you see on the wall here. And then, she was very good at that, and we had ended up with a lot of her paintings. And, there was a group in Washington of artists that got together, you know, and displayed their paintings. And then, later she got into ceramics and she used to teach ceramics. And, there's a pot right there, that's an award-winning pot. And, if you do ceramics—and she would, you know, and have a kick wheel. A lot of them are mechanical but she used to use the wheel and do her ceramics manually, not with motorized. And, she had a kiln and that had to be a very big kiln and they would get a pot like that in it. So, you'll see a number of things. See the owl back there?

AT: Yeah.

ML: She did that and all those other pots up there you'll see.

AT: She was quite prolific.

ML: Yeah. So, she was very good at ceramics and she taught it. And of course, when she passed away we ended up with a lot of that. (laughs) What we didn't give away to friends we ended up with.

So, my father was born in Baltimore and he was the son of a Chinese railroad worker. So, I have written this book called *Grandfather and the Indians* [*Elephant and the Indians*] and it's a story of a Chinese railroad worker who was captured by Indians. And he eventually, my grandfather eventually after he left the Indians after two years he went to Baltimore, Maryland, where he—his mother, in the Chinese tradition, sent him

back to China to get married to someone he didn't even know from maybe an adjoining village or something.

(phone rings) So, I really need to—I gotta get that.

[00:21:10]

AT: Are you gonna let Gladys get it?

ML: Huh?

AT: Are you gonna let Gladys get it? (laughs)

ML: Yeah.

AT: Okay. And so, he went back to China.

ML: So, he got married. And, he was over six feet tall—why he was called “the elephant” by this fellow workers—and he married a woman that was under five feet. But, she was a very unusual woman in that she was like a psychic; she could do things and remember things that were very unusual. And, I've written about that, about how Grandfather, when he passed away he wanted his—well, he was buried there in Baltimore in a traditional burial, but he wanted eventually to be buried like all the Chinese do back in their home, in the homeland village in their cemetery where all their ancestors were. This was during World War II, I think, when Grandmother was living there in the Canton area. And well anyway, she wanted his bones to be—or *he* wanted his bones to be, you know, eventually sent back to China and buried in the ancestral grave. So, they took his bones and put 'em in an urn and sent them back to China. And, later on grandmother heard from him that he was cold where he was and his hand hurt. And, they opened up the, well, the grave there and looked at the urn that he was in, and the urn that he was in was not large enough to accommodate his bones because he was over six foot tall so the lid was not on tight. And then, Well, what's that about, you know, his hand? So, my aunt went back to the grave where he was first buried in this country and the person there said, “Well, I know why you're here.” And, he went to a drawer and he opened it up and presented her with a finger bone of my grandfather that did not get put in the urn. So, they sent that back to China and opened up the grave there and put the finger bone in there and got a new urn that fit the size of his bones. And then, all was quiet then, no complaints. Now, that's a true story. And, you can (laughs) decipher what you want but that did happen. So, I've wrote about that, about grandfather's bones.

AT: Do you know why your grandfather came to America?

ML: Yeah. He came to—the Chinese had to send—and in this part of China in the Canton area was where most of the Chinese came from that settled in this country, the early ones, not from any other part of China, they came from Guangdong [Province] and Toison [District], several districts in that area to—first to mine gold, which they weren't received very well in the goldmines, and then later to work on the railroads. So, he came to work on the Northern Pacific Railroad, which ran from Seattle to, I think, Lake Superior. And, I think the Golden Spike Ceremony was somewhere in Montana.

So, that's when he got captured. He was working on the railroad with—and the Chinese worked in advance of the track lay to clear the land for the railroad. And so, they would cut down trees and, you know, smooth out the roadbed and all that so when they came, next teams would come along and lay the ties in the railroad they'd have a path already on it.

So, they were isolated then from the camps, the work camps, so they didn't have any protection. And so, the Indians at that time had been—had their territorial land returned to them by the US government, but when we wanted it for something like building a railroad or for mining we'd take it back. And so, the Indians thought we were, you know, reneging on our treaty so they didn't—they were gonna try to stop the building of the railroad by either killing off workers, bending the tracks or burning the ties, and doing whatever they could to disrupt it. So, the fact that grandfather was captured and survived that is very unusual. And, it turns out that he was adopted by the Indian chief because the Indian chief had lost his own son.

So I figured, Well, we didn't know anything about the details of his life for two years with the Indians because he didn't tell grandmother that or anything. So, I felt that that was a story that maybe I should write, you know, I wish I did a book on that. And, it's fiction but it's based on some true incidents and things. So and, I figured that if he was adopted by the chief that he had some special privileges amongst all of them. So, they allowed him to engage in all their activities like hunting for buffalo and going for the—west to get salmon and things like that.

So, after two years with the Indians and we have got to—they wanna put us on reservations down (inaudible)\_\_\_\_\_; we do not want to go on the reservations, we want to be buried in our, you know, our land just like the Chinese want. So, we're gonna try to escape and try to make it up to Canada. And, the chief then told my grandfather, he said, "You know, we've had you for a couple of years now and you haven't been able to send money back to your family, and this is not your fight. So, why don't you go back to the railroad?" And so, he did, and he had a very sad farewell with all his Indian friends and his girlfriend.

And, went up to one of the railroad stations—because, it had been two years later and so the railroad had been finished a lot by then. And, he met this gambler in a saloon there who happened to be from the same district that my grandfather was. And so, they each had—you know, could speak to each other in the same dialect. And the gambler says, "Oh, I'd like to hire you as my bodyguard because I'm winning all this money, and there's no way that they're gonna allow me to leave (laughs) with this money. I'll go on the train with you to Baltimore if you'll be my bodyguard." And so, they did. And, that part is based on some facts in that some of my cousins said he arrived in Baltimore with this gambler and they don't know why. And I figured that, Well, I can think of a good reason why he was: you know, he was protecting him.

[00:31:25]

AT: That's interesting. You were telling me that while your father is Chinese American your mother is German—

ML: Scotch-Irish, English, and German.

AT: And, they married at a time where it was not very common for people to mix outside ethnic lines.

ML: That's right.

AT: Do you know how they met?

ML: My father was in—I guess when up in Detroit and those areas was involved in—the Chinese only had about three choices of what they could do: they could work in restaurants, they could work in laundries, or they could work in produce or groceries, even if they had an education.

He actually—his first marriage was arranged but it didn't work out. And so, he then met my mother because she was working for him in one of his restaurants, I think, as a cashier or something like that. And, she was—

They married in Toledo, Ohio, I think, and I have their marriage certificate. In the northern states, Caucasians and Asians could marry but other states had—such as Virginia and the South—had miscegenation laws, and Chinese, Filipinos, any other Asians could not marry Caucasians.

Now, California was that way up until maybe the 1960s or something or after the exclusion laws were repealed. Because, Ah Quin's—Ah Quin is San Diego's first mayor in Chinatown. There's a long story about him how he came here to—and looking for a job all over the West Coast. And, he had an education and he was bilingual and he couldn't get any job except a cook or a houseboy. And, he finally came to San Diego and because they wanted him to supervise the building of the first railroad in San Diego at the California Southern [Railroad]. And his youngest daughter, when she got marriageable age she wanted to marry a man from Texas and she couldn't get married here in California, she had to go down to Tijuana to get married because of the miscegenation laws.

So, that's a part of the story that I wanted to tell in my first book: Chinese immigration, exclusion, what are all the details of that? It's very complex; there's more than one exclusion law; it went on for a lot of years, from 1882 through 1888 through 1920s and all the way to 1943. In 1943, they repealed the exclusion laws because we were fighting a war with Japan and the Chinese were our allies. So they said, It's not good from a propaganda point of view to be excluding Asians when we're fighting against the Japanese, who wanted to, you know, take over all the Asian countries.

AT: Do you remember when the exclusion was repealed? You were a teenager then.

ML: Uh no, I don't, I didn't—I was on the East Coast then and it didn't affect me as—so I don't remember the—it's not only, it's not—I didn't think about it.

Well, I guess I did think about it in some respects (laughs) 'cause when I got married I decided, Well, maybe I won't get married in Virginia, I don't wanna risk it. Because, on my birth certificate it doesn't list me as being Chinese but as white. So, if somebody was to really (laughs) throw the book at you, you can say, Hey, your birth certificate says you're white and you're marrying an Asian, and we don't allow that.

AT: Interesting.

ML: So, I didn't want to handle that because I knew that there was a case in Virginia of a Filipino that was in the US Navy down in Norfolk, Virginia, wanted to marry a Caucasian and they wouldn't allow it.

Later on when I started doing research on it I figured that, If I write this book the first thing I gotta write about is Chinese immigration and exclusion because that affected all the Chinese in America no matter where they were. I mean, you can write about San Diego's history but you got to know that exclusion affected them just like it did if you were anywhere. And then, found out that there was, like, *fifteen different laws*, not just one law; it just went on for year after year and it got worse and worse 'til at one time they said, Well, we're gonna include *all Asians*, you know, whether you're Chinese or Thai or Korean or you're Japanese or whatever, you're all being excluded.

Well, when I wrote that I was a member of the San Diego Chinese—well, the Chinese Historical Society of San Diego. And, the wife of the president, who was Tom Hom at the time, said that I wanted to publish that as a journal because we hadn't been writing anything, we were just doing collecting photographs and stuff like that. And I said, "Well, we need to publish because, you know, if you're gonna be a legitimate historical society you gotta preserve this history by writing it." And so she said, "No, we can't publish that because that's too negative." And I said, "Well, of course it is, (laughs) that's the idea. It's a lot of negative things and then it happened, which we don't want to happen, people need to *know that*." She said, "Well but, there's still people around that are using their paper name." In other words, Chinese used to buy papers from others, you know, and use that name so that they could get in the country. And I said, "Well, that's just the fact, the way it was. And, those people at this are—they're not going to be sent back to China because they violated this law way back there in those early years." So she said, "We only want to deal with the positive things that happened." I said, "Well, you can't ignore, you can't ignore these things 'cause it happened. And, we don't want it to happen again so you need to publicize it." So anyway, when I got around to writing my book I put it in as the first chapter.

[00:40:23]

AT: I agree, it sets the stage for—

ML: Well yeah.

AT: —life in America for the Chinese.

ML: That's right, yeah. You know, it was really educational to learn about all of these things that did happen and how it kept getting worse and worse as the years went on. And, that's what helped to eliminate the first Chinese fishermen that came to San Diego. The fishermen had fishing villages on Point Loma and eventually at the foot of Chinatown down at Third Avenue near the Pacific Mail Steamship Wharf. And, in 1888 part of the exclusion law was the Scott Act, and it said that anybody who goes outside the three-mile limit to sea is leaving the country and when they come back they have to show their papers. Well, Chinese were never allowed to have papers, they were never allowed to be naturalized citizens. So, what did they have to do? They had to sell their junks, to which they had quite an industry going, and/or go back home or whatever. And, that pretty well

*killed* that industry. And, it had a big impact on Chinatown at that time because the fishermen were gathering all this abalone all the way down in Baja California and the Channel Islands and that and shipping it out of San Diego to San Francisco, where it would go overseas or where it would go to labor groups working on—Chinese labor working on railroads or other things. And so, that had a big impact on San Diego's Chinatown and it—

But, what the purpose of those acts were is that they wanted to eliminate all the livelihood of the Chinese. If they eliminated their livelihood that would force them to go back home. I mean, it's a pretty drastic sort of way to do it but it was true. And, if Chinese were not allowed to work for the federal government, the state government, the county government, the city government, and if they worked for something like a hotel or some Caucasian business there, it would be boycotted to force the owners of the businesses to not hire Chinese. In fact, they used to put ads out, "*We don't hire Chinese in our business.*" And, you'll find some of that stuff in the *Journal*, in the History Center's, you know, what do they call them, the journals or whatever they used to put out?

AT: *The Journal of San Diego History.*

ML: Yeah. They were put out annually, I think it is. I know you have a whole bunch and I looked through all of those. And, you'll see things like that, ads like that in there. Unbelievable but true.

AT: So then, when the fishing industry went away, what did the Chinese in San Diego do for a living?

ML: Well, I think some of the fishermen, they had gone into—well, if you got to be a merchant that was one that you try, you know, to become a merchant because merchants were exempt. Merchants and students and high-level diplomats, they were exempt class, which we didn't have that many of those anyway. But, the Chinese would try to take advantage of that, being a merchant. Oh and, they may go into farming, you know, because that's something else that they did back in China. So, they did have some vegetable farms and things like that, like, down in Bonita and a few places around where there was—well, there was a lot of farmland here in San Diego in the early days, (laughs) Mission Valley and places like that.

But, because merchants were exempt the Chinese said, Well okay, we're all gonna be merchants. And, they would designate all of their workers in a store as being merchants, owners, you know, even though they might be clerks or what have you. And so they say, Well, how come this business has a half dozen merchants? Well, they all *supposedly* had an interest of \$1,000. Because, I have all these documents that I got from the archives and it shows that—see, \$1,000 was the amount that you had to invest and to be a legitimate merchant. So, I *know* that all of these men that were working for these places didn't invest \$1,000—they never had \$1,000—but they were listed on the documents as being, you know, one of the partners with \$1,000 that they were in. That was the way that they sort of got around that little item, I think. (laughs) I think the government realized that but they didn't force that issue. So, that's why there was a whole lot of businesses, 'cause merchants were exempt.

AT: Backing up to your life before we go too much into the San Diego direction, um, can you tell me your memories of World War II?

ML: Oh well, I was in high school in the 1940s. And everybody, all the guys were joining up. I mean, they would get into these programs, you know, they had programs in the Navy and other places and that. And this friend of mine, the two of us said, Well, they're looking for people in the Merchant Marine and we can go and sign up for the Merchant Marine and maybe we could get an education. Because, they needed radio operators and there are two radio operating schools—one in Boston and one in New York Harbor—and that would be good training.

We signed up and went to Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, which is right next to a Coast Guard station. Sheepshead Bay was—they used to brag about us being the cleanest base in the whole country, and I know why. It's because we were out there cleaning it all the time, (laughs) picking up cigarette butts. And, it was sparkling clean all the time.

But anyway, I was there and two months' training. And, I qualified to go to the radio school. I said, "Oh, that's good," and even though I didn't know anything about it at that time but they would teach you. But then they closed it, saying, We have already too many radio operators because there's only *one* on a ship, so and everybody wanted to be that. (laughs) So, they closed out those schools. And so I said, "Well, what is my other choices?" Well, you have three things on a Merchant ship: you have deck crew; you have engine room, working down on an engine, you know, from broilers and the hull; and third is stewards, mess boys and that. So I said, "Well, I don't want that, and I don't want to be down below in the engine room because you don't know what's going on (laughs) up above and it's hot and smelly. So, I want the deck. I'll sign up for deck."

The first ship I went on they put me on the wheel, I was down in Norfolk and said—at that time they had magnetic compasses, they didn't have these automatic things, and you steered by compass. They said, Follow this course, you know, on the compass. And so, I got on the wheel and I was following this. And then, it's not all that easy because you have tide and you have wind and drift and stuff like that, so you kind of constantly being adjusted to on this course. We were going over the Atlantic Ocean. There's guys looking over my shoulder 'cause there were five of us on there, we all got a time at the wheel. And so, I got pretty good at it because I could see what was happening, you know, you—if you wait 'til the ship starts to go like this (leans to one side) and then go back, you're going like this all the time, like a snake. And so, you have to compensate by turning the wheel *before*, you know, it starts to move. So, I kept doing that, following this course pretty good.

Let's see, I was going up the coast and we were going to go to New Bedford, Massachusetts, I think that's what it was. Because, this thing was carrying—and so, when we off there and we got our first pay I got ten more dollars, I think, than these other guys. I said, "Why is that?" Oh, we made you an active able-bodied seaman, which is a higher salary (laughs) because, you know, you could steer so well. So anyway, that proved itself later on 'cause when I went through a canal one time and you had, like, a couple of feet on each side they had beyond the wheel steering through there. (laughs) Well anyway, that was kind of interesting.

[00:51:55]

Oh, one trip that we went to, well, I was on a Victory ship that was converted to a troop carrier, and we went to France and we brought back some of the soldiers there. And, the ship was—had bunks put in it in the holds where they usually carried cargo, five bunks high, and all these guys were to have to sleep on the bunks down there. And, I had wondered why all these guys were up on deck sleeping on the deck. Because, the ship would roll, you know, and they'd all get sick. And, if they got sick down there (laughs) it was smelly and messy, and so they'd say, I'd rather sleep out here in the open air. I said, "Well, I can sympathize with you on that." Because, when the ships—those ships would start to roll in some of these storms. And, I remember I was on the wheel there when it's empty and we're going in to pass it, and it would roll and it'd roll and it'd roll and it's going over, like, almost 45 degrees. And I'd say, "It's gonna come back, it's gonna come back." And, it goes roll—and it goes back the other direction. And, you're hanging on this wheel and you're hoping this thing doesn't—'cause normally on an empty ship they put ballast in there to keep it, you know, level and sturdy; otherwise it's bobbing around like a cork.

So, one ship I took was a Liberty ship, and the Liberty ships were built by Kaiser. And you know, they could build 'em, like, in one week, and really slapped them together by building the hull and then pushing the ship into the harbor and then they would have all of these components on the ship prefabricated in another part of the country and shipped up there next to the dock and when the ship got its hull made they would push it out there and then they'd start working on it while there while they start another ship. So, they could build a Liberty ship in just a little over a week. And of course, sometimes I thought, Well yeah, I could tell that because the way this ship is (laughs) gonna fall apart.

So, I was on one, we went to Cuba to get sugar, raw sugar, these *big* bags of raw sugar. And, it filled the ship because, you know, Europe was really suffering from the war and all that and those people were not in good shape. Sugar was just like gold, you know?

And so, we had this *whole* shipload of sugar and we got out in the middle of the Atlantic and we lost our power and we were drifting in the middle of the ocean towards Iceland, I think. (laughs) And, I didn't know anything about the engine room 'cause I stayed out of there, but what they did—oh, a lot of these ships would come by and see us there and offer to tow us, you know? But, if you tow another ship, you get a good portion of their cargo, value of the cargo goes to you; that's the rights that you get. So, they did not want to lose all that so they waited for a ship to come along that was the same company. And, they started to tow us and we're so *heavy* that the towlines broke. And, I remember that, the towline goes, drops down to the bottom of the ocean. Of course, when you have an emergency like that you're working twenty-four hours a day, you might work thirty hours straight because it's the safety of the ship and you have to work towing it. So anyway, they told me—they got the ship—the broiler started by burning our cargo, burning sugar; sugar does burn.

So, (laughs) we went on our way to Antwerp, Belgium, we went into there along the straits. And, one side is Holland and the other side is this estuary. And, there was just row after row of sunken ships that I guess either got—maybe they scuttled them or maybe German dive bombers got them, but they were—it was shallow there so all the ships were just sitting there, you know, straight up, and row after row of them. And, we were being led by minesweepers because there's a lot of broken, drifting mines around



that they had put out everywhere. And they'd say, Well, go up on the bow and see what you—I said, “Up on the bow? That’s the first thing—” so I’m up on the bow and I’m looking at, you know, the ocean or the straits there to see if I see anything. And I said, “Oh my gosh, I hope these minesweepers get all of these.” Because, where do you get hit first? You get hit in the bow, right? (laughs)

And then, when we got up in there we’re waiting to go into Antwerp you have an area, a way to go into a little canal or something like that. And then, the storm comes up and blows us up on the shore and we’re—and you walk up to the side of the ship you look down, you see the beach there and, What the heck? So, they bring these tugs out and they wait for high tide and they drag us off of that and then we get in there and then they send a diver down to see if there’s any damage on the bottom. I said, “This ship, what else can happen to this ship? (laughs) We’ve had it.”

So, it finally made it back to the US and it went right to the ships junkyard. You know, they have these—in the James River down in Virginia they have these places where all these ships go, and I guess there’s some in California, too, up there in the north where they—and they just tie them up there and let them rust. Sometimes they recover some of ’em, but most of the time they just sit there and maybe use the scrap. So, that was an experience.

AT: And, how long were you a Merchant Marine?

ML: Two years.

AT: So, until V-J Day?

ML: No, well, forty—actually V-J Day I was in New York and on leave and I was in Times Square. They said, Oh, everybody’s going down here and celebrating. And I said, “Well—” I was in uniform and that, and I went down there and all these Navy guys were down there. And, you know that the statute that they have of *The Kiss* statute? Well, I saw all of those guys doing that, you know, all these—especially Navy, a lot of guys in the Navy would just grab any girl they could and kiss her. I said, “Wow, I’m too shy to go do that.” (laughs) But, that was kind of an experience ’cause not many people can, you know, experience that.

[01:00:27]

AT: You were right in the thick of it.

ML: I just happened, I just happened to be in training in at—or at, oh, (inaudible)\_\_\_\_\_.

Some of the places I went to in later on—if you were in the service between December 7, 1941 and December 31, 1946 you would have veteran’s status, those two years—no, ’41 to ’46—anyway, anytime within that period. So, I was—got veteran’s status but didn’t get actual[ly] recognized ’til 1988 when they passed the law saying the Merchant Marine would qualify for World War II veterans. But, all the benefits were gone by then, you know, GI Bill and all that.

So, I had to pay my own way through school by working nights at my father’s restaurant. And, it was pretty tedious anyway going to school. But, one thing about

George Washington University, they had a lot of night classes and they had a lot of weekend things so you could, you know, work. One semester I worked fulltime and went to school fulltime. (laughs) And, I got married. So, it was about the most hectic semester in my life.

AT: I bet.

ML: Yeah, I don't know how I got through it all.

But the benefits, the only benefit I get now is I can be buried in a national cemetery, which is—that's something. And, your spouse. So, I can be buried in—not the Rosecrans now because that's filled up—but Miramar.

AT: You've written in your book that during World War II, quite famously, Japanese Americans were interned. And, I'm wondering how that compares with the Chinese American experience during World War II.

ML: Well, compared with what?

AT: Uh, the Japanese American and the Chinese American.

ML: Oh yeah, yeah. In San Diego, I did a—I took the 1930 census. There was a time when, you know, the census had to go so many years before it's released. So, right now I think you can get the 1940 census, but it's not very good. The '30 census I got of San Diego, the Asian District. And, it was very good because the census taker was Ah Quin's youngest daughter, and she knew Chinese and she knew the area. So, when you look at what she put down there, I said, "Hey you know, this is accurate." Because, a lot of times when they get just any census taker they go in there and they say, This is a Chinese area, I don't know—what's your name—I don't know Chinese or anything, and they get it all messed up. And, even some of the census takers would just say, Oh, this whole block is Chinese, and that's all; they wouldn't enumerate. You know, what good is that, right? But, she did it and she listed all the Japanese, all the Chinese, and everybody there that was in that area. And, 500-and-some people, I think, in that—in those 6—those blocks, 6 blocks or 8 blocks. And well, I have it in my book: so many Chinese were, most of them were—so then the Japanese, there were 100-and-some Japanese; and there was 10 Filipinos. And, it lists where they lived and their names and the occupations and stuff. So, it was fantastic to have. And, I learned a lot about that because a lot of those—the 1930 census, a lot of those Chinese were living down there that grew up in that area and they *had to*, they all had to stay in that area.

And then, in 1942 the Japanese all had to leave, you know, to go to those internment camps. And, some of the Japanese just abandoned their buildings, others tried to get somebody to take it over. And in some cases some of the Chinese did go in there and say, Well, we'll take over this area as business in this shop and something like that, and keep it going. And a lot of Japanese, they didn't really go back to some of those businesses, you know, when they came out. They probably went—

But, the Asians couldn't own land after 1913, they passed a law which [said they] couldn't own property. That law was actually done because Japanese were buying up

farmland in the Central Valley and stuff like that. And so they said, Well, we've got to put a restriction on land owned by Asians.

But, Ah Quin had preceded that so he had bought some property and stuff around—he was smart enough to know real estate is a good investment in San Diego. And, he bought some land and he farmed all the way down in Bonita and areas in Mission Valley and a lot of places. So—

AT: Um so, after the war you mentioned you paid your way through school. Which university did you attend?

ML: George Washington University.

AT: And, what were you studying there?

ML: Geography.

AT: Geography. Had you—

ML: (laughs) The reason I got into geography is because all the traveling I did in the Merchant Marines. I said, "You know, this is interesting, these countries and things, their life and their situations and stuff like that. I think I'll (inaudible) \_\_\_\_." And, there was a very good head of the Department there, Geography Department that I got to know very well. And, he's the one that nominated me for Phi Beta Kappa. He said, "You are first student in the Geography Department that, you know, got Phi Beta Kappa." So I thought, Oh, that's—for what it's worth. (both laugh) They keep sending me stuff and they want donations, of course.

AT: Of course. And, is that where you met your wife, Gladys?

ML: Yeah, it was, she was there. She went to Berkeley and she studied geophysics. And, geophysics has not—doesn't cater to women. And, she was one of the few women that, you know, graduated in geophysics. And, she said the professors got very annoyed because when they went on field trips they had to bring their wives along to be a chaperone, and they didn't that. (laughs)

But anyway she, got a job in Washington, D.C., because they needed female geophysicists to get into the petroleum, you know, exploration sort of field. And so, she got into seismology. She went to the Coast and Geodetic Survey in—it was in the Department of Commerce. And so, she became a seismologist into earthquake for a while. That's where I met her.

Well, when we were living downtown we went to the Chinese Community Church there, but we moved out in Virginia where it was a little too far to do down there. But, they would have weekend dances, you know, maybe once a month or something like that and go someplace. And the Chinese, all the Chinese kids, the teenage kids, you know. It was one of those that we were going to that I met her.

Oh, we dated and I was still in school, and that's when I got married. And, that's when that one semester I worked fulltime and I was married and we had our first child. I said, "Never wanna do that again." (both laugh) You have to be young and energetic to be able to survive.

[01:11:33]

AT: And, what did you do after college?

ML: What did I do after college? Oh, actually I was—while I was in a cartography class somebody came up there and said, Any of you guys like to have a job? And, Yes, two of us said yeah. Since I was working my way through school and not on the GI Bill and that I said, “Yeah, I need a job.” So I thought, Well, I’ll have a job and I’ll work maybe during the summer. But, it ended up it took longer than that.

And, I first worked in a—well, they wanted to hire geographers because in World War II we found that we did not know very much about some of these foreign countries, and especially in the Pacific. You know, all the islands and things like that that we wanted to get the Japanese out of and invade and—Iwo Jima and Guadalcanal and all that—we didn’t have knowledge about what it was like there, what were the soils like, what kind of food did they—can they live off—you know, we didn’t have that kind of geographic basic information about those places: what are the tides, what are the—all that sort of stuff. So, they went to universities that had geography professors and they hired them and said, We want to develop a knowledge worldwide of foreign countries. So, they developed what they called a survey, which went country by country to, you know, look at its physical features, its industry, its transportation, ethnic diversities, population, all those basic kinds of things you need to know and to understand that. So, that became quite a program to develop an encyclopedia type of thing of worldwide countries, something that was really, really needed.

I recognized that—this is later on in my career that things were changing in terms of doing maps and graphics with the advent of computers. Uh, at first everybody had to use the mainline computer. It was the big, big IBMs, you know, and all like that. And so, you had to get support that way. But, later on when individual laptops or—oh, what do they call them—word processors and all that stuff came into being, it changed *everything*. So people would say, Well, I don’t need anybody to do this for me, I’ll do all this myself, I’ll make maps and graphics, you know? And, people like analysts and writers, economists and that, they’re *not good* at that. They may be good at their subject matter, but when it comes to presenting it to somebody else who’s ignorant about that subject, they can’t do that. So, that’s why they need the graphics people to say, Hey you know, we need to show this in a way that can be understood by high-level people in the government.

And so I was asked one time, Could you do a five-year plan on how we can work this in?” So, work this into—and I said, “Okay.” I said, “Eventually, you know, as everybody is getting these computers we have to develop a system where we can design all this stuff by using the computer. Because, you need—” and that’s when the computer graphics came in.

General Electric had a system called Genigraphics, and all things being developed by MIT and others. I think they went up to Aspen, Colorado, and they did a—they videotaped all the streets and everything like that, and they worked a system that you could be going down a street and you could say, Oh, there’s such and such a hotel or restaurant, and, Oh, we can bring up what they got on their menu today, and all of these kinds of things. Uh, very expensive to do in the early days but, you know, now everybody’s got it, (laughs) right? In the car you just, you put the GPS system on there

and it tells you where to go. But, this back in the old days *that* was something that was very advanced.

So, I would go and visit these places, MIT and places up in various parts of the country to look at their systems and to hire people. I went to Carnegie Mellon at the university there and I talked to the graphics people and they said, Oh no, we're not that interested in computer graphics because it's taking away our creativity and that. And I said, No, (laughs) it gives you a tool that you can be—so, you know who was using it? The fine artists! The fine artists said, Hey, we can use that. I can do this, you know, mural thing and I can just hit a button, I can change all the colors in different variations. They said, If I had to do that manually—paint all these things—it would take me forever, but with this computer I can make all these changes. And I said, “Yeah, you're—” but the graphic artists, they looked at that as destroying their creativity, whereas the fine artists said, Hey, I can be more creative. So, we had to convince them that that's—that was the big advantage, you know, to do it.

Same way with publishing. You got the word processor—you know, when you had to do, say, a monthly report or something you used to get these yellow pads and you'd write all this stuff down on it; and then you'd hand that to the secretary and say, “Here's a paper, can you type that up”; and they take it and they type it up and they give you a copy back; and then you look through it, “Oh, we're gonna change this and change that.” And, that's a time-consuming process. But, if you can sit down yourself and type it onto a word processor, you got it there because all you have to do to make changes, you know, it's simple. (laughs)

Huh? You probably don't remember that sort of thing that you had to do, right?

[01:20:37]

AT: No, no. (both laugh)

ML: 'Cause, everybody has them, has that capability. (references map)

AT: That's very impressive on the computer, yeah. And, when did you pursue your master's?

ML: Oh, (laughs) that's a good question. So, I was working fulltime and I was going to school and I started going for my master's because everybody was encouraging me to do it and I had a good professor. And so, I was doing it part time, but my time ran out on me; you got so many years to do it or else that's it. So, it ran out 'cause I went overseas for a while and I couldn't do it when I was there. So anyway so I said, “Okay, so I don't have this master's. I've got the equivalent, really; I have twenty-seven credits out of thirty,” you know, just lacked three.

So, I'm here in San Diego and I send one of my books to the Geography Department there as a gift. And, the new head of the Geography Department contacts me and says, “Oh, that was a terrific book. I'm coming to a conference out in San Diego. Can I meet you?” I said, “Sure, come out and I'll show you around.” And, she came out and she was from India, and she says—and I said, “Oh, did you know I have twenty-seven credits toward my master's and I need only three?” “Oh, that's no problem. I'll get you reinstated with the dean.” Different dean, of course, and this was sixty-three

years later, you know? And she said, "But one thing: you have to write a thesis." "Oh?" "And, I'll be your supervisor." "Oh okay."

Uh, my first mistake. Because, she goes on sabbatical to Singapore and we're doing this by e-mail. It's *very difficult* to try to write a thesis like this. And, sometimes we didn't have compatibility in our software and the things would change size, text, and, you know, it just got to be awkward as all heck. And, I was paying—instead of \$13 a credit I was paying \$1,425 a credit hour, and so this was costing a lot of money. So then, then while she's out there in India she decides she's going to go to the Punjab, which is—you know, you're out of reach of—so, like, we lost a whole period there a month or so. And, it ended up that I had to sign up for another semester and pay *another* whatever. And that's when I told her, I said, "You should've gotten my money back for that because you—" anyway, it was just money.

So, I got my master's. And then she, "Well, I want to write this up in the—" in their publication that the Geography Department puts out periodically. And, she writes it up and she puts down that it was fifty-three years. And I went to her and I said, "Your math is a little bit wrong. (laughs) It's *sixty-three* years, from 1951 to—" you know? So anyway so, she writes it up as that, she got it right.

And then you know, of course, you're invited out there to go to the graduation ceremony. I said, "I've been to Washington, D.C. It's too long and there's nothing for me to go out there." And, you go there in a big university, you know, there's *mobs* of people there and you're just one of the mass of the—and you go up and get something that's probably not the thesis anyway, just a roll of paper, right? (laughs) I said, "I don't want to go through all that. What's the advantage of that?" I said, "Well, send me a copy of the thing." And then they contacted me and said, We don't know your address to mail this to you. I said, "What? After all this time you don't have my address?" And I thought that, Hey, they're so departmentalized in these universities; those that do this, they don't know what the others do that.

So anyway, I finally got it.

AT: That's got to be some kind of record, though, sixty-three years.

ML: (laughs) Yeah. Well, I can't picture myself going up—I mean, I've seen these guys go and get their degrees and they're umpteen years, you know, they make a big thing about it. I don't know.

They charged me a lot for that thesis to bind it and all that. And then, they did they got the name on the edge, the whole name of it title on it, and they didn't put anything on the front cover. And so I looked at that and said, "Boy, I paid all that money for that?" So, I took a thumb drive of what I had and I took it down to FedEx and I said, "Can you print this and comb bind it?" And yeah, okay, we'll do that, \$14.

AT: Smart move.

ML: (laughs)

AT: So, when did you come to San Diego?

ML: In '83.

AT: What brought you out here?

ML: Retirement. Well, being a geographer—of course, my wife's family was originally from San Francisco, Oakland area, Bay Area. And so I had looked at that and said, "Well you know, where's the best place in California? San Diego's got a lot of advantages: it's on the ocean, we've got access to the Pacific, we've got Mexico within five minutes—adjacent to it—you've got mountains, you've got desert, you got everything, you know, it's a good climate—'cause I'd been here visiting for a while and I said, "Boy, all year round the sun is shining." (laughs) And, San Francisco is not that good, you know, you get more rain up there.

And the problem is, if I go where my wife grew up, her family's there; you have to go to everybody's birthday party because her sister has thirteen grandchildren and they all celebrate all this stuff, and that's all you're doing. Now so, we are choosy, we go to the big weddings and the big, important things but not every single—'cause you're expected to be there if you're right there. So I said, "Well, we're far enough that we could go but—"

AT: And, your children were grown at that time. Did they stay close?

ML: Yeah. They came out here to go to school and they weren't gonna go back. Because, nobody retires in Washington, D.C., you know? I mean, they got great things there but—you got the Smithsonian Institution, you got the Library of Congress, you've got a lot of stuff. But, I've seen that and done that. Traffic is terrible, the climate is not good, it's a rat race. I know some people that just retired, I said, "Why do you want to retire here?" Well, we're stuck here because our family's living here. I said, "Well—" but then there's others say, No, we're going to Florida, or, We're going to California or someplace.

AT: So, you moved here in 1983.

ML: Eighty-three.

[01:29:35]

AT: How did you become involved with community history?

ML: Well, I found out that they had a Chinese Historical Society here. And, I told you about writing, I wanted to do the journal but they didn't—you know, wife didn't want it—anyway, they had a historical society and my wife joined and I joined.

And, we went around with Tom Hom and his wife, who we met because Tom was, you know, a former city councilman here. And, he had a lot of contacts and he had a lot of connections in Mexico. In fact, he had a farm down there for a while, and one of his sons was born there. And so, once a week we would go down there and we would go to Mexico and have dinner and that, and it was quite a lot of fun.

And, we even went to Mexicali one time, we organized a trip to Mexicali 'cause Mexicali was *founded* by Chinese, which a lot of people don't know because—and they have big Chinese restaurants down there. And, we went down there, we went overnight and we had people from Los Angeles, even, Historical Society, Chinese Historical Society in Los Angeles join us. We had two busloads go down there.

And then, we started the museum. The old building was moved from—it was one of the first Chinese Mission buildings built in 1927, and it was on land owned by George Marston. And, we wanted to establish something in San Diego's Chinatown so we could have a home for the museum. So, we said that we wanted to move that building, which had been emptied out and kind of just homeless people hanging out in there and it deteriorated quite a bit. And, one of the—I can't think of his name—the guy that did a lot of the archeological work down there—'cause every time you tore down a building in Chinatown somebody had to go in and dig there and to see if there's any important—because everything was buried underground, you know, in those early days in pits, so that's where all the artifacts were. And, they had to be saved and they had to record them all and the archeologist had to identify everything and that.

And so, we wanted to save the old building and he said, "No, no, it's not in good enough condition," and all that. So, we got Dorothy Hom and Sally Wong-Avery, they organized all the seniors to go to the city council and say, This is our heritage and we want to *save* it, this building. And so, they moved it and moved it down there. And, I remember when they moved it down the street—it was only about a block-and-a-half away—and they moved it down the street and they backed it up into the area where we wanted it; it was exactly on the spot where it was supposed to be. And well, at first I think we restored it for a while, but that became the museum. Now there are three buildings down there. We had the Asian Pacific Historic District and it was gonna be saved as part of the—let's see, what you call it—the city got money for preserving this land and historically. And, later on the governor and the General Assembly closed that program down, urban development kind of a program. They said, No more—

AT: Not Better Cities?

ML: Huh?

AT: Better Cities?

ML: Well, it wasn't called that, it's a—but anyway, I've got it written up in my—in that thesis of what happened.

But anyway, we had all these plans to put an arch over the street, you know, saying this was Chinatown to putting banners up. And, we had a designer, a Filipino guy, who was going to do—he did all this and he had a plan and it was all—had been approved. And then, they took these funds away. And as a result, well, nothing has developed, even the plaques that are on the historical buildings are corroding and rotting away. And, I tried to get those replaced.

And in fact, I rewrote some of them 'cause some that are in the Gaslamp Quarter had Asian uses and they're supposed to be mentioned in all those plaques. And somebody at that time said, "Oh, that's small potatoes just to get those plaques. We want to go for the bigger picture." Well, it turned out that, you know, they axed the whole thing so we didn't get those plaques revised either.

So and, there's two stone lions that are going to be going up because they were purchased by our director down there and they were supposed to go on a couple of the corners there. And, they've been sitting for years in storage because they didn't have the funds to do it. They even had the sidewalks changed to put the arches up there, and a



couple of those were done but they're just sitting there now because no money to that. But anyway, those stone lions are going up this coming month. In June they're gonna have a ceremony down there and they're down there along the sidewalk. They had to dig down below and put a lot of supporting foundations in there for these stone lions. They are going down the corner of Third and J Street. And, they'll be a ceremony down there.

AT: That's great. So, you're finally seeing some of that come to fruition.

ML: I mean, I know the guy that purchased those is very happy about that. And, he's getting ready to retire from our museum.

So, I figured that, as I mentioned, we needed to write and preserve that history, and that's when I started writing a book. And, I wanted—and I prioritized the interviews on that oral history program. You know, we need to interview the oldest ones that lived down here and those that maybe are not in good health because we're gonna be—may lose those. And so—

AT: As we were discussing before the interview, that was around 2001. So, about fifteen years ago you were doing these oral histories—

ML: Yeah.

AT: —on the Chinese American community here in San Diego.

ML: Mm-hm.

[01:38:36]

AT: So, how *does* the Chinese experience here in San Diego compare with that of California and the rest of the country?

ML: Well, I think that I think that some of the things that happened in San Diego here made more impact than it would've had up in San Francisco and other areas where they have larger Chinese populations. And Los Angeles, although Los Angeles had some problems, too. But, losing the fishermen was a big impact.

And, the fact that we had the Panama California Exposition in Balboa Park in 1915, that had a big negative impact on the Chinese. Because, when you have an Olympics or an exposition, world's fair, the first thing they think about is, We've got to clean up the city because we're gonna have all these people coming from everywhere. And, I know that because I went to Australia and I saw what they were doing there when they—before they had the Olympics or world's fair or something.

So, Chinatown was right next to the red light district in Stingaree. And, that was the target: We've got to get rid of this—the gambling, the saloons, the bordellos, and all of this. And so, that's when got Walter Bellon, the health inspector, in charge of that. And, in 1912 he goes down there and he says, “Okay, we've got to close this up, and we're gonna ship all these gals from this one bordello on Fourth Avenue, ship 'em all out of town.” And, they all bought tickets. They were going to send them to Los Angeles but they bought roundtrip tickets 'cause they knew they were coming back. But anyway, that was a difficult sort of thing to do.

And then at the same time they said, Oh, there's so much substandard housing that the Chinese live in—because these were uptown owners that rented these properties out to the Chinese and they didn't maintain them. So they said, These gotta go. So, they tore 'em down. What happened to the Chinese then, did they build anything else for them? I mean, here are these people now that are homeless or else they had to go back to China—if they could afford to go back to China—they had to go and move in with others. And, one thing they got smart enough to do, We'll move into those bordellos that were—where they kicked out all these women. (laughs) So, not ideal but that's housing and that's—so that happened there. So, it just practically almost eliminated Chinatown back in 1915.

So and, the area was—you know, Chinese couldn't go above Market Street, then you've got the bay on the one side or two sides. And so anyway, that had a very heavy impact on Chinatown. I don't think there's anybody living there anymore, any Chinese living there.

They have tried to preserve the historic sites and they have the, what they call it, the historic site (inaudible) \_\_\_\_\_. When they did things to the one restaurant down there they called on me and said, You have any photos or anything about this and who lived in this café that was Japanese occupied? And, I dug up a lot of stuff for them. And, they had a thing down at the theater there about this, which was kind of interesting. And, oh, we got money to build a senior center down there on land that was formerly Woo Chee Chong and Gim Wing, two merchants, on that site because I guess the—well, they wanted to develop that site and said, Well organize a fund to—and it's supported by the government, you know, affordable housing or, what do they call it, the affordable housing.

AT: Subsidized?

ML: Huh?

AT: Subsidized?

ML: Yeah, subsidized. And, there's about forty-some seniors living in there, but they're not Chinese necessarily because anybody who qualifies. But, we used that building and the—there's a, what's it called, a senior garden and we have a—there's a big room in there, a community room where we have banquets and we treat all the seniors to Thanksgiving dinner and stuff like that every year. But the seniors, the Chinese seniors don't live down there, they live in these other high-rise buildings, which is cheaper for them. But, they're within several blocks of the area so they walk down there when there's any events going on.

AT: And so, some of these people that you interviewed for the book, I'm wondering what kind of stories stand out to you about life in San Diego's Chinatown?

ML: Well, what was their daily life like? Where did they find recreation in that limited area? They seemed to get along with each other, and because it's a small community so they all knew each other. And, they went to a local elementary school there and they all went to San Diego High School because that was the only high school accessible to them. And,

they had these clubs in the high school, an Asian one or Chinese one that was a—and then they had one for the Japanese, too.

So and the Japanese area, they didn't call it Little Tokyo they called it Fifth and Island, that was the Japantown of San Diego, Fifth and Island. And, they were more concentrated there. So and, they walked there and they would walk with—the Japanese would go there, too, and they would just go by there and they'd all, well, all sort of—just like when I was in Michigan there, you go along and you walk and you pick up all the other kids from the other farms, and this way you pick up all the people that live down there and by the time you'd get to school there's a whole bunch of you.

And, the Chinese used to like to be—what do they call the ones that are out on the street corners, you know, helping people—

AT: Crossing guards?

ML: Yeah, the Chinese used to do that. They'd say, Oh, they liked the Chinese 'cause they were very reliable, so they would have them be crossing guards on the streets. They would tell about their stories doing that, they would tell about, some about attending the school and being active in some of the sports.

And then recreation, they said, Oh, there wasn't a lot of traffic down there. We would play football on Third Avenue and we would play basketball. We'd put a net up on one of the Eucalyptus trees there in front there, we used to play basketball.

And then, what did the girls do? Well, the girls did their usual thing: hopscotch on the sidewalk and other things, you know, that girls usually did. (laughs)

There was an ice factory on a corner a couple blocks away, and they said they used to get all this chipped ice that used to pile up there and they used to have these battles. They'd get cardboard boxes and they used to have these fights throwing, you know, like, snowballs made out of this ice at each other. (laughs) And, the girls would get involved in that, too. So, they would tell some of those stories.

And, they would deliver groceries and go along on the delivery trucks to various places.

And then, they were not far from the water, so they said, We would walk down there and there would be a big lot we would cross over and we'd go down there and we'd play in the rocks along the water and find these little crabs, you know, those kinds of things.

And I think—I guess they did probably fly kites in empty lots.

And, they had a—oh yeah, playing football there, they had one Caucasian guy was playing with them, and they taught him how to say, “car coming” in Chinese. And, they'd go out in the street and say, *Chē láiile, chē láiile*, you know? That would've been kind of funny.

So, they got along well with all the kids there, but they were restricted to that one area south of Market.

[01:50:52]

AT: I'm sorry?

ML: Hm?

AT: What about South America?

ML: Market.

AT: Oh, it's Market.

ML: Market Street, below Market Street. Market Street to the ocean is—to the bay; couldn't go above Market Street.

AT: Got it.

ML: I mean, there were some Chinese laundries and things where—up above that—where the Chinese lived upstairs or in the basement of those places, but not in separate housing necessarily; they lived in the business. That seemed to be allowed (laughs) 'cause it was, like, their work. But as I said, that early on everybody wanted to be merchants.

AT: Well, you mentioned the story about the Caucasian boy who played football in Chinatown, but I'm wondering what you heard about the climate of race relations in San Diego from the people you've interviewed.

ML: Well, I think that, yeah, they would run into that if—yeah. I mean, we did that in Washington, too, I remember. These guys would come by and, you know, and then—and I remember that this one black kid that lived in—over about a block away from where we were because his father was a janitor in a building and he lived there in the building, and he became our friend. He's kind of a bigger guy than most of us, and when the other guys would come and say something to us he would be there and he'd say, "You know, (laughs) leave these kids alone or you'll answer to me." So anyway, you have some of that going on. But, I didn't see, they didn't tell me a lot about the—

Well, I told you about, I think, the one that took the 1930 census was the youngest daughter of Ah Quin. And, when she wanted to marry a Caucasian from Texas she had to go to Tijuana to do that. A lot of the Chinese did marry Caucasians. I think one of the most attractive Quin children married this guy who was a—got to be very well known; there's a book about him, Royal Rife, I think his name was. And, he invented this machinery to—very advanced machinery with microscopes and a lot of stuff like that that was able to do—take and destroy cancer cells. And, he had a very difficult time with the medical establishment. They did not want anything like that, takes their business away. I mean, you know, if you got this thing it could—so he had a lot of trouble with that. But, there is a whole group of people that are trying to redo that machinery and stuff like that because it was—and they wrote a book about that and they contacted me and said, Do you know anything about it, because he's married to one of the Quin family members, Do you know anything about what they said about him, and all that. And I tried to, you know, help them out but—I think they're still active. Yeah, I have a—there's a book written about that. Yeah, he was Royal Rife, I think that was his name.

So, I think that the kids played together and they did a lot of things together. And as I said, they had a Chinese Club in San Diego High School. I guess, let's see, after—a lot of them went—did go to school. Well, a lot of Chinese I think eventually went to San Diego State and UCSD, you know? And, I'm trying to think of—

They all volunteered for the military in World War II. And, there was a group that went together to training and they got—served in an all-Chinese unit. And, it wasn't meant to be discriminatory, it's just that they thought that, If we sent Chinese to go and support the war effort in, you know, in, where the Flying Tigers were at—'cause they all got trained in repairing of aircraft and they were sent to these places in near Kunming and that where Chiang Kai-shek was located. Uh, they were sent to different towns in there as repair, as part of repair crews for the aircraft that flew the hump. And, some of them went there by ship to India and to, I think, around landing in, like, Bombay or something and then going up in—oh no, let's see, going to northeast India and going over the Burma Road or the Ledo Road.

And, the guy that was—that became president of Woo Chee Chong, Jennings Hom, he actually drove a jeep down the winding Burma Road. He said he was sliding around on it 'cause it was muddy and all that. He tells me in the interview with him that he was there. And when it came his birthday, he said, "Oh, I'm going to celebrate my birthday by opening up this can of abalone," I thought he said it was, because it was so rare. I think it was abalone. But, that's in my interview of what his life was like there.

And then, as the war was drawing to a close they all went up to one base there and in part of China. And they had this choice of, We will ship you directly home if you want to go home or we will allow you to go down to your ancestral villages in south China. So, some made that choice even though they had never been there before 'cause they were born in this country, if you want to go visit that. Or you could go, take a ship and go directly back home, mostly to San Francisco.

[02:00:32]

So, that's some of the stories.

Oh, one of them, he went training in Texas, I guess it was, and he volunteered when they were asking them, Anybody want to go to Europe? He volunteered and he says, "Oh, that's stupid, you should never volunteer." So, they sent him to England and he was flying with the Flying Fortress and bombing Germany. He had twenty-five missions over Germany and he had a couple of Purple Hearts because he was wounded several times. And, after his twenty-fifth mission he got back and he kissed the ground and, you know, was happy to be alive. Anyway, he was telling stories about being on those Flying Fortresses. They weren't heated and he said that, "It was so cold that if you wanted to eat something," he got out a sandwich and he had to take his .45 and break it up so he could eat it. And, usually the Chinese were made tail gunners because they were smaller and that and that's one of the dangerous jobs and they're being cooped up in the tail end of, you know, of the plane.

So, we had another one that wasn't in Chinatown, he didn't grow up in Chinatown there. But, he went to Italy and he became a pilot of a B-17. And, how did he get to be a pilot? 'Cause, they *never* let Chinese fly; No, you had to be something else, you couldn't be a pilot. I mean, they had this kind of prejudice there, No, you can't be anything like that, you've got to be, you know, a grunt or something. But, he ended up becoming a pilot because when his father came in the country, they didn't know how to pronounce the Chinese names and you get an immigration officer saying, "Well, I don't know what that is, I'm giving you a name," and he gave him the name Schoon, which is German, you know? And so, his name became Victor Schoon, S-c-h-o-o-n. They thought he was

German so he got into flight school and he became a pilot. And, he actually was—he flew fifty missions over there. But, when he came back he got married he said he went into a place with his wife, who had Chinese dress on, and they wouldn't let him in. They went to—he said, "Here's this guy, (laughs) fifty missions flying a B-17 and they won't let him in this one military—" whatever it was.

AT: Was it a base?

ML: Well, it was a—

AT: A veterans' club or something.

ML: Yeah, some sort of like a club, yeah. (laughs) Anyway, that sort of upset him.

AT: Now, one of the most powerful chapters in *In Search of Gold Mountain* is about causes of death in Chinatown in the early years. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

ML: Causes of death?

AT: Mm-hm. Uh, you were looking at suicides specifically in Chinatown.

ML: Oh well, I did some in a write up about interviews—

AT: The coroner's reports.

ML: Yeah, the coroner's reports.

AT: Yeah.

ML: That was given to me by Jane [Kenealy]. She said, "Oh, you ought to look at these things, they're all handwritten," and that. And I looked at them and I said, "You know, I'm gonna get a lot of information from those coroner's reports because they—you had the coroner—judges had to look at these things and determine, you know, Is this whatever a legitimate claim and that?" Uh and, they had people testify. And, there would be people who would be friends, Chinese friends that would testify. So, that was very revealing, I thought. I don't think there was anybody in there that was—that I interviewed or anything. These are—

AT: These are older cases, I believe.

ML: Yeah. But well, there was one about this guy that—he died while he was in a boat out in the harbor fishing, I guess. Then, he hit his head somehow or other and the wife was there and she waved down these ships that were coming in, you know, and they rescued him. And then, she ended up marrying some guy that—well, the question is: did he really hit his head on that or did she maybe—because she was going with this guy, Caucasian guy. So I mean, we don't know for sure, but I thought it was kind of an interesting sort of question. (laughs)

And then, there was another one that guy got killed and they threw him down a well. He was a former either railroad worker or miner. And, this was all quite a ways away from, you know, San Diego. But, they discovered the body and he had been beaten and then just thrown in a well 'cause he—other miners or railroad workers didn't like him, didn't like the Chinese, the fact that they were maybe taking their jobs. And so yeah, that was pretty interesting.

It might be kind of boring reading all the testimony 'cause the testimony sometimes was very repetitious in that, but I thought it maintained the character of the thing. And, you learned a lot from the friends that they called in to—well they said, Oh yeah, he was—he didn't have a home and he got sick—because a lot of them would get consumption, which was tuberculosis, that was very common and there's no cure for that. And the question that the judge always asked was, Did he use opium? Asked it no matter what the situation was, that was the standard question. Opium was actually allowed to be imported, and we have some of those opium cans in the museum down there. So anyway, the guy would say, "Well, he was suffering from that and opium was the only thing that would relieve the pain," it was like taking a Tylenol or something; they didn't have any kind of painkillers and they would just take the opium, not because he was an addict, just because the pains were so bad.

[02:10:02]

AT: It's interesting that he would automatically assume, you know, a Chinese man would be addicted or be involved with opium. The judge, that is.

ML: Yeah. Well, they, yeah, they just, I don't know, they just—that's what they wanted to know, he asked every one of 'em (laughs) about opium.

AT: Switching gears here, what kind of growth and changes have you seen in San Diego since you arrived here in '83?

ML: Well, some of it is negative, and the worst thing is the traffic. And, it used to be I'd drive around—and the highways are the same but the—and no matter how much they widen it all and what happens is everybody then moves out there, you know? And, we can hardly get out of our community here in the morning because all the people from La Jolla are coming through and cutting through the Navy housing down there to get to [Interstate] 5 to go north. And so, I think I agree with Greg Cox, I said, "The southern part of San Diego's gotta develop some kind of industry. Because, everybody lives down there but works up north, you know, around Torrey Pines and all that," and all that stuff, you know? So, it's the only city I know of where there's more traffic going *out* of the city at rush hour in the morning than are going into the city. They're coming from south going through the city and going up north. That's very strange. (laughs) And I think that, you know, they're right when they say they need to have some jobs down in the South County there that—where people can stay down near there, you know, rather this—and, if they widen the freeway like they're talking about it, how long is that gonna be? So, we'll be suffering for a long time while that's going on. (laughs)

And, we went out to Fallbrook the other night to a "Living Legend" [event] at the Fallbrook Library. Oh my God, we just got on 52 and it was backed up and backed up all

the way to 15. And then, 15 was bumper to bumper all the way up there because all these people were going to Temecula, a lot of them because, you know, housing is cheap in Temecula but there's no jobs there.

So, I think that aspect of—and when a city starts to grow in there they've got to—you've got to do something more than just keep building more roads. Because, they build more roads and more people will say, We've got the road we'll go out there, and the developers will want to go out there then. And, there's all this pressure for developers to develop all the empty land they can develop, regardless of what it—you know, they do it to the community just like what they do—

In Chinatown, they would've—if those properties hadn't been designated historic they would've all been torn down and there would've been, you know, high rises and all kinds of stuff put on them. This is right across the street from the museum, they had that property down there and it was all—it was Chinese lived on that and they built this high-rise condo on it, and we complained about it. Actually, it was a Chinese guy who was the architect, and we had to tell him, Hey, didn't you know this is Chinese property in there? You ought to do something about it you ought to do something about it. So, he started to—and then he put a little Chinese flavor into the balconies and things like that to make it look like it fits in with Chinatown. They need to do more things like that.

The Ah Quin home was torn down, and that would've never been torn down if people would have realized how important that was historically.

AT: When was that torn down?

ML: I don't know, I have to look it up.

AT: Okay, that's fine. (both laugh)

ML: It was probably in the eighties, early eighties. Oh yeah, when they built the Horton Grand, I think, yeah.

AT: So, the city itself was experiencing restoration.

ML: Yeah. Well you know, the Horton Grand was built from—by moving the buildings down from further uptown there. And then, they tore down a historic Chinese residence that was right there on that street. And, the Chinese didn't complain about it, they didn't want to fight that because they wanted to either have it moved or restored or something. And so, they just tore it down and built the Horton Grand on it. And then, this other building that was over on—notorious building where all these women were arrested, sent off, that building was Anita-Regal Hotels. When they tore that down they built supposedly a replica of that over on Third, but it doesn't look like that because they said, Well, we can't—we want to add another story to it, and so that sort of destroyed the old roofline because we want more space for, you know, for the hotel. There's maybe a little sign down there somewhere that says—but, that's what ended up on Ah Quin's home site.

But, the one building they did save—and there was a lot of pressure—is the one that's next to it that was moved there from thirteen blocks away. And, I had to tell the city that 'cause they had *no idea* because they have *no* records of building permits in the old days. You could just go and get some lumber and start building, you know,



something and there wouldn't be any record of that. So, they had this one, they had a building that was—had a reputation of being a—oh, what was it? I'll have to get out and read my book. What they did was they tore that building down and they moved a building from Thirteenth and L Street or something quite a number of blocks away, pulled by horses, and put it on that lot. So anyway, the city designated that as being built there in 1888 or something like that. And I said, "Did you know that that building was not built there, that it was brought there?" And I showed them the photo and I said, "We have a letter from somebody to the Chinese who moved into that building, original letter and I've got that from somebody up in Lakeside that was evidently—the people had moved the building." And, I went to that house one time trying to find who this person was but they weren't available. But anyway, when I told the city, "*Wow*, we didn't know that. You mean it was moved there in such and such?" "Yeah," I said, "yes, it was." He said, "Oh, that's amazing." (laughs)

AT: You had positive impact there.

ML: Yeah. Well, that's— (opens *In Search of Gold Mountain*)

AT: Going to refer to the book.

ML: That's a good—oh and, these are the bordellos. And, down in—oh, the San Diego Flume the Chinese built, helped build that, too. And, the Del Coronado Hotel.

[02:20:28]

AT: Right, right. And, were they laborers?

ML: Laborers on the Del Coronado. Here's Ah Quin's home. Here.

AT: All right, yes.

ML: (references photographs in book) This building, see, there's horses tied up to it. That's when it was being pulled off of its foundations in—it was Kaland and Company Grocers. And, the only way I could find out when that was moved was look at the tax records. Look at the tax records and find out if the building—I mean, if the building is not on that site the taxes go down. So, I looked at the tax records and said, "Oh, such and such date they moved that building out and the taxes dropped because it's undeveloped land then."

AT: Good thinking.

ML: Well, you had to the county and dig all that stuff up. It was kind of hard to find but I found it. It was called the Green Light, the Green Light Bordello.

AT: Green Light Bordello.

ML: Yeah. It was a famous bordello. But, that was what was on the building, I mean, on that site and they tore that down and put this in there. Oh, when was it moved? (reads from book) "In 1891 with a look at the tax reduction of the improvements, the Kaland

building was empty and grocery business was abandoned. And in 1893 the lot, which was owned by Julius Cook, had the improvement value deleted, which would imply removal of the building.” So, that was kind of interesting. And, you can look at the building before it was and look at it now, and the one thing that’s very distinctive is the roofline. The rest, the front has been changed, you know, modified, and the door and stuff like that.

AT: Interesting.

ML: So, those are the kinds of things that you—that’s very satisfying to discover something like that that nobody ever knew about, I mean, no one now and the city didn’t know about it, so—

AT: Right.

ML: Okay.

AT: What does San Diego mean to you?

ML: What does San Diego mean to me? Home.

AT: Place to hang your head at night.

ML: No, it’s a—I mean, I think the city, the climate is great and all that. I mean, we have our drawbacks that I mentioned to you about traffic and things like that.

But, the universities are good. I mean, UCSD is a—I hope they do get a football team or something, but it’s got an amazing amount of—I did a whole presentation on the development of bioscience and engineering at UCSD. And, I know Shu Chien, who heads that department and the former head of that established the bioengineering department and stuff. He’s a good friend. Just saw him the other night at a banquet, he and his wife. Because, we had a—Congress of History had a session about, you know, development of industry and science in San Diego. And I said, “You’ve got to talk about the development of the bioengineering sciences. So, we’re very much leaders in that. And you know, other places try to steal some of this stuff, like Texas. But, it’s very significant.

And, San Diego State is—well, a lot of the—it’s a very good school. And, I give talks out there and have done a lot of the—and UCSD, I went out there to their library and gave a book signing ceremony there because they have an Asian, Chinese, and a—they have a librarian who’s Asian. And, they had the exhibit on the Transcontinental Railroad there recently that was developed up in San Francisco in Stanford, and it came down. And then, I gave a talk about my grandfather since he’s a—since I’m a descendant of a railroad worker.

They asked me to go down to—they asked me to go to Washington, D.C., did I tell you that, about—

AT: No.

ML: Well, when they decided that—the Labor Department decided that the Chinese railroad workers, they needed recognition because they built the Transcontinental and other railroads and they've, you know, never been acknowledged for that contribution to developing the West and that. And so, they did an exhibit of the Transcontinental primarily up in San Francisco and Stanford, and that exhibit went to UCSD for a month or so and then it went to our museum. But, they had asked me to come to Washington, D.C., because they heard that I was a descendant of a Chinese railroad worker. But I said, "Well, I don't think it's necessary to go out there," (laughs) and I sent 'em a book instead.

AT: An honor nonetheless.

ML: Yeah.

AT: And finally, what would you like to be your legacy?

ML: Well as I say, I'm a living legacy, and that's—the other choice is not very good of not being a living legacy.

But no, I think that what I've been able to do with researching Chinese American history and especially in San Diego is something that nobody else was doing, and I hope that somebody will continue it, you know? They haven't trained anyone yet (laughs) because—I guess I'm the only curator really at the museum as such because they asked me what kind of—when they were organizing the thing, What would you like to do? And I said, "Well, I'd like to be curator of Chinese American history. I don't want to work on *Chinese* history, that's too, too much, you know, to tackle. But, I think that Chinese American history is limited enough, and especially the history of the Chinese here in San Diego."

AT: Mm-hm. Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

ML: (laughs) No, I don't think so.

AT: Okay. Thank you so much for your time today, I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW